

Nadalian: River Art

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An interview by John K. GRANDE

Nadalian is an Iranian sculptor whose life's work involves engendering a respect for living creatures and the natural environment. To achieve this, besides living with nature himself, he established sculpture grounds in a peaceful environment in natural surroundings. Water is a living element that contributes to his sculptures, and many of the symbols he engraves and sculpts are derived from ancient mythology and the rituals of pre-Islamic civilizations.

Still other symbols express a more contemporary language emergent from the use of new technologies. Nadalian's art is expressed through a variety of media, including rock carving, environmental art installations, ritual art performances, figurative paintings reminiscent of ancient drawings, video art installations, web art works, and interactive pieces requiring public participation. Nadalian spends most of his time in the mountain region of Damavand in Iran, and his *River Art* is Nadalian's Haraz River project, near Mount Damavand.

Located near the village of Poloor, 65 kilometers from the Teheran-Amol road, Nadalian designs sculptural form direct in nature; on the riverbanks are human figures, hands, feet, birds, goats, crabs, snakes and fish. Symbols of the Zodiac, the sun and the moon surround these designs, reminding the viewer that the images are not merely representations of nature, but symbolic concepts. What Nadalian intends is for the spectator searching for the artwork to perhaps discover something more valuable than his stones in nature. He exhibited at the First Conceptual Art Exhibition at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and his works can be seen in many other countries such as Italy, Finland, Germany, Spain, and France. Nadalian likewise buries many of his carved stones across the world and is preparing a map of their locations for the web. These mostly show images of fish and animals and traces of human hands and feet. For Nadalian earth and museum are equal. Nadalian's art focuses on fundamental crises in the contemporary world. If there are any audiences in the future, his work will tell them the story of life and humanity. Nadalian presents his works via new media, and utilizes the capabilities of the digital age, such as the Internet. A number of websites, such as www.riverart.net, www.mysticalart.net, www.nadalian.com, and www.webart.com are dedicated to introducing his works.

Until man implicates a blade of grass, his so-called great scientific and historical achievements will amount to nothing. You come from a country with a great garden tradition that in turn influenced European gardens. These include the gardens of Esfahan and Shiraz, though many



have not survived ancient times, wars, and history. Flowers, plants and water fountains, indeed natural rivers and landforms as well... Is your personal search a search to find a new language of expression within nature, or instinctively a rediscovery of something ancient...

Ancient Persian culture and gardens have been a significant influence on my work. But I consider my strongest influences to be, on the one hand, the nomad lifestyle of my ancestors, their life close to nature and, on the other, the bas-reliefs dating back to the earliest Iranian civilizations. Buried deep in the heart of the Iranian hillsides, these carvings use nature as a setting for art. My aim is not to reconstruct a representation of kingly glories and triumphs as depicted in the hillside carvings; I wish to return to the nature I call my own, to be a part of it. My life surrounded by nature, and the harmony I have found there have led to the formation of a language in which both the material and the content are derived from nature.

My work differs from the ancient reliefs in that my carvings draw on their environment to generate meaning; the surroundings become part of the artwork. Without the motion and sound of the rushing water, my work has little meaning. The river has been transformed into art. The work's meanings depend upon the cosmic order. The rising of the water level in spring and the lowered level in autumn gain significance from the life-affirming rituals that

are part of the philosophy of ancient Iranian mysticism.

Of course my influences are not limited to ancient cultures and civilizations. American and European environmental artists and Land Art have left a strong impression. But the difference lies in the scale and construction methods—my work does not draw on huge dimensions and industrial machinery, nor is it ephemeral like Andy Goldsworthy's short-lived artworks. Vision plays an important part in my approach.

I want my work to emphasize both the obsolescence and decay of nature, and a utopian ideal that speaks of its renewal. I didn't choose to work with nature; it chose me, it mesmerized me and taught me how to re-present what seemed irretrievably lost. The choices may have been instinctual; maybe I was seeking my lost paradise, the paradise of my childhood memories, a longing for the ways of my ancestors. But my allegiance is not restricted to the past. I don't wish to defy present realities, I don't deny the beauty of the present. I have a very positive relationship with new technology, especially informational technologies, and I feel that new media complements and completes my work. My voice may have gone unheard without new media. The future awaits us. I would like to preserve and retain the beauty of the past for the present and the future.

I also think about the future. I have deliberately buried many of my carvings in their natural

Nadalian's intervention in Germany. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Nadalian's intervention in France. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

settings. These burials are secrets I share with the earth, an exhibition for later generations. These pieces highlight the value of the earth, the cradle of humanity and its civilizations.

Our civilization is facing an ecological crisis of incredible proportions, and this changes the way we conceive and approach notions of art. Your approach is as much about letting nature have its own voice within a landscape as it is about integrating personal expression... Can you comment?

Maybe we can no longer speak of a single civilization in the world today. Many societies are fully equipped with new technology, and they are the real force behind the environmental crisis. Artists and scientists in developed societies are fully aware of the implications of this crisis, thus it is debated in academic and scholarly circles, and strict laws are passed. This is not the case in developing and Third World countries, where they are either still struggling to gain access to advanced technology, or it has been imported already. But the sensitivity to environmental issues that should accompany these advances is still lacking.

In the past, ritualistic beliefs stipulated that elements such as water and earth remain pure; to pollute them was a sin. Today the descendants of those ancient societies have neither retained their divine beliefs nor gained the necessary knowledge to combat the ecological crisis.

I agree with you, in any case, it's no longer a question of whether we live in a small village or the global village. We live in the age of new technologies and capabilities. These resources have created new difficulties and crises. History has never before witnessed such destruction brought upon nature. Environmental crises and the need to resurrect a pure environment call for a new art form. Environmental art can play an important role. Art is capable of illustrating the crisis, critiquing its conditions, and describing a utopian world. Polluted environments are the result of polluted emotions, thoughts and attitudes; a pure world belongs to a pure being. The pollution of nature comes from the pollution of the human soul. We may be wrong in thinking we can work to save the environment; we have to realize that we too are part of the environment. All we need to learn is to stop polluting it any further. This awareness will help us humans more than anything else.

Can you tell me something about your River Art project in and around the Haraz River, near Mount Damavand, not far from Poloor.

The village of Poloor is my ancient homeland, the summer camp of my ancestors. I lived in the city during my years as a student, and I spent seven years out of the country. I returned to Iran after finishing my studies. I was trying to escape an environment that was polluted in every way: environmentally, politically, and morally. Even

artists are reluctant to waste their lives swamped in bureaucracy and traffic jams. I wanted to return to good health, to a paradise. In this polluted world, untouched nature can be a paradise. But it turned out that the paradise of my childhood was, and still is, rapidly disappearing. There were no more rushing rivers. The dwindling streams were full of plastic bags and trash, which had replaced the fish. No one prayed for rain anymore. The sky had turned away from us. People no longer believed in the divinity of water, of the elements. I wanted to visualize that lost paradise for myself. The fish that I carve are alive for me. But technology doesn't even allow imaginary fish a space to live. The story continues. I carve fish, and then the bulldozers move in to make way for new villas and highways, and my fish die. We now have a cemetery with fish carved on all the headstones. But I haven't lost hope. I believe in standing strong until the end.

I sometimes walk several kilometers along the riverbed, cleaning the dirt off my carved stones and cleansing them with my own hands. It has become a ritual for me.

Your sculptures and reliefs are literally engraved in the land, beside rivers, in rivers. Are they questions as much as answers about our place in the natural world?

The carvings depict fish, crabs, birds, goats, snakes, human handprints and footprints, and snail-like spirals. They could be read as representations of the surrounding environment. The first question is artistic intent, what I intend them to be. Why I have returned to nature may also be the answer. This is the revival of a ritual, the belief that nature should be celebrated and the rushing sound of water should be listened to. The question raised by the carvings is this: why have these creatures, that once made a home in and around the rivers, disappeared, and why have they now reappeared as virtual forms? Why this fossilized existence? How will future generations read these images? The work is also an expression of my hope that nature remain in its natural form. I want to ensure the continued flow of life. I feel that my work maintains a symbolic layer of stories, eternal legends, and endangered symbols.

The symbols are ancient. What do they represent?

Nearly all of the forms I use are ancient Iranian symbols. They represent creation, fertility and various natural forces. The fish and the goat represent fertility. They also highlight the ancient relationship between symbols and the zodiac. The aim was to re-envision the heavens on earth. The female form I use is the goddess of water and fertility. I have a specific interest in ancient Iranian mythology, in which Anahita was worshipped as the goddess of water and fertility; it was believed that she purified the waters and the milk of nursing mothers. Myths of creation spoke of how the earth died in the winter and

was reborn in the spring. This features in my work through the fish, alive in spring, and even the moss growing on the carved rocks. I'm delighted by the sight of the fish beneath the water surface. When they are dry and above the water in the colder months, I feel this to represent their death.

But the meaning of the symbols is not merely tied to ancient beliefs. They are intended to be eternal and lasting. I believe an art work can be interpreted differently at different times. I see the fish as a metaphor for a human being, and the river, the sea or the ocean is the world that surrounds us. We need a clean environment to stay alive. Perhaps one reason for selecting these symbols is my need to deliberately return to nature. When a human being lives surrounded by nature, natural symbols will appear in his or her work. Many of my carvings show the female figure combined with a fish or moon symbol. Female figures were water goddesses and fertility symbols in ancient cultures, and the fish and moon also represented rain and fertility. In an age of increasing water pollution, the water goddess symbolizes a conscious reference to a concept of holiness, perhaps a way to raise awareness and escape the present ecological crisis.

These fish, goat, crab, snake, hand, and eye symbols have universal import. You integrate them like details we discover within the land. Were they inspired by ancient myths?

These forms are seen in many different cultures and refer to symbolic meanings. The signs of the zodiac are familiar to many nations and are global symbols. The goddess of water is also respected in many cultures, especially in Iran's neighbouring countries. As I previously mentioned, I don't insist on a unique reading for my works; viewers who encounter them through different mediums won't necessarily read them the same way. Art's attraction for me is its infinite capacity to expand. But I do feel that the image of a fish carved on a rock in a river is understandable to anyone. In the rural areas where I work, even the shepherds and farmers who can't read are able to understand them.

And what do the hand images represent for you?

The handprint is one of the earliest forms testifying to the presence of humans in prehistoric times and primitive societies. We can use our hands to create beauty in harmony with nature, or to leave the mark of ugliness upon our surroundings. I personally felt that the handprint, when combined with the simple image of an eye, describes a sort of prayer, a holy communion. It may however be more meaningful when read in the context of Iran's religious culture.

In the Islamic era, the image of a hand has come to symbolize the sacrifice of one of the most prominent Shiite, a holy figure who lost his hands bringing water to thirsty children during a battle. The symbol is displayed where charities are distributed and during religious ceremonies. It may relate to my work in the connection between the ancient holiness of water and the symbolic gesture of offering water to the needy.

Can you tell me something about your project in Mallorca, Spain?

After participating in the Venice Biennale, creating environmental pieces on the Lido, and along the Rhine River in Germany, I was invited to show my work at the Galleria Portals in Mallorca of Spain. I had an exhibition there, and also created a set of carvings on the rocks of the island. The rock formations were different from what I'd been working with before, and there

I believe that the experience of living in the landscape is also an influence on your work and influences where you place a detail, or how you integrate a piece. Is that true?

I am familiar with industrial sculpting methods, and I know the possibilities they offer to modify nature. But when I work in a natural setting, I try to preserve nature as a whole, to make as few overall and overarching changes as possible. This may be viewed as a form of respect for the



were rock pools throughout the island. I carved fish upon the sides of the pools, and titled the piece "Thirsty Fish." In this collection, water represents life, purity, wisdom, and knowledge, while the fish continues to stand for man. I produced another work in Spain, a reference to the purity of water and cleansing the spirit. It showed footprints passing through a pool of water. I was trying to highlight the importance of water in different cultures and religions, how it is a means of purifying the body, as well as the soul.

Do you believe that there is an earthly paradise and that it is possible?

Many mystics believe paradise is nothing but good deeds. This is what I believe in as well. Descriptions of paradise often use examples of earthly pleasures, therefore heaven must be similar to this earth in some way. Many religions attempt to describe paradise through art. This is demonstrated throughout the history of Iranian art. Iranian tile work, carpets, architectural decorations, and miniature paintings are a reflection of the divine. To us artists, paradise can be the depiction of inner beauty itself.

Your carvings are very much hands-on, somewhat rough, a direct response to a sense of place and the life that surrounds and is within us.

beauties of nature. But this is also how the carvings gain their rough-hewn texture, and there is a harmony between the carved rock and its surroundings. I want my carvings to be small symbols, for people to stumble upon them, to realize that there are things to discover and understand in nature. I would like to keep my viewer as immersed in nature as possible, to make him or her wonder at the simplicity and strangeness of the work, rather than its grandness.

To conclude, I'd like to add that regardless of the outcome of my works, whether they are considered successful or not, what is valuable for me is the process through which they are formed; living a good life. The most glorious moment is when my imagination seizes upon an image in nature, or an imaginary vision captivates me. I believe that once an art work takes shape, the best possible work has been created in the best possible place, at the best possible time. ←

Writer and art critic **John GRANDE**'s reviews and feature articles have been published extensively. John Grande's latest contributions include an essay for *Nature the End of Art: Alan Sonfist and Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (www.sunypress.edu), and *A Biomass Continuity* in July in collaboration with Coco Gordon. He also curated *Eco-Photo* at Dorsky Gallery, New York in Jan. 2005.

Nadalian's intervention in Iran. Photo: courtesy of the artist.